

Exposure to News and Diverse Views in the Internet Age

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I. INTRODUCTION

While the Internet has yet to eclipse television as the medium most used by Americans to get news about national and international issues, the gap has narrowed in recent years.¹ Since the early 2000s, fewer Americans report using television and more report using the Internet. Newspapers also have diminished in prominence. Since 2008, more Americans name the Internet as the source of most of their national and international news than newspapers.² This trend coincides with the increasing popularity of online news sites. Legacy media sources, such as CNN and the *New York Times*, are joined by newer ventures, such as *Politico* and *Huffington Post*, in the dissemination of news online. This transformation of the news raises important questions. What, if anything, does the transition to online news mean for coverage of important public issues? What about the availability of contrasting viewpoints?

These modern questions have historical roots. One precedent for thinking about these issues can be found in the now abandoned

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¹ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "July 2011 Political and Media Survey," <http://people-press.org/files/legacy-questionnaires/Media%20topline%20for%20release.pdf> (accessed September 3, 2012).

² Ibid.

Fairness Doctrine. The doctrine, which has not been enforced for decades,³ was arguably the most prominent regulatory attempt at addressing these questions in the United States. The Fairness Doctrine required stations licensed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to use the public airwaves to discuss “public issues of interest” in such a way that provided for the “expression of the contrasting views of all responsible elements in the community.”⁴ The purpose of this essay is not to examine the drawbacks and merits of the doctrine. Instead, we draw from the doctrine’s normative propositions about the availability of news and diverse perspectives as a starting point for examining online news.

II. ONLINE NEWS AND PUBLIC ISSUES OF INTEREST

What does the move to online news mean for coverage of important public issues, the first objective of the Fairness Doctrine? In the subsequent paragraphs, we review social science research about online news content, audience news use, and the effects of online news. We then reflect on what the research means for the discussion of public issues of interest.

A. Content

The Internet’s potential as a news transmitter is immense. The medium does not impose the space and time constraints of newspapers, radio, or television. The ways in which information can be conveyed online are multiple and include the traditional modalities of audio, print, and video as well as newer features such as hyperlinks, computer-mediated communication, and interactive data visualization tools. All of these features can be employed in ways to enhance learning about public affairs. The Internet also gives more people the ability to produce news; no longer are we in an era in which the scarce broadcast spectrum needs to be carefully allocated among a few news outlets. Today, the Internet provides anyone with minimal training a platform for putting news online. The availability of hyper-local news sites and citizen journalism projects are a testament to this idea.

³ Brooks Boliek, “FCC finally kills off fairness doctrine,” *Politico*, August 22, 2011, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0811/61851.html> (accessed September 3, 2012).

⁴ *Editorializing by Broadcast Licensees* Federal Communications Commission, (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1949) 1250.

In practice, however, the Internet has not always lived up to its potential as a news source. In 2010, for example, the Project for Excellence in Journalism published the results of an in-depth examination of the news ecosystem in Baltimore.⁵ Although the study identified numerous Internet news providers, these newer outlets did not engage in much original reporting about major news topics in the city.⁶ Newer news sources, such as those run by community journalists, do not have the resources to cover the news in the same manner as traditional outlets.⁷ At least in Baltimore, new online news providers often reprinted news from established offline outlets such as the *Baltimore Sun*.⁸

Distributing high quality journalism from traditional outlets could be beneficial; however, there are questions about the quality of traditional journalism efforts as well. Traditional media outlets, facing declining audiences, decreasing ad revenues, and newsroom layoffs, may not be able to produce the same type of journalism that they once did. Indeed, the Baltimore study tracked the *Baltimore Sun*'s news product over time and found that the newspaper was generating less original reporting than it did a decade earlier.⁹ A recent FCC report authored by Steven Waldman and the Working Group on Information Needs of Communities summarized the Baltimore study and related research: "the growing number of web outlets relies on a relatively fixed, or declining, pool of original reporting provided by traditional media."¹⁰ These conclusions demonstrate that the promise of the Internet as a news venue is far from realized.

⁵ Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, *How News Happens: A Study of the News Ecosystem of One American City*, January 11, 2010, http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/how_news_happens (accessed September 3, 2012).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, "The State of the News Media 2010: An Annual Report on American Journalism," <http://stateofthemedias.org/2010/special-reports-economic-attitudes/community%20-journalism> (accessed September 3, 2012).

⁸ Pew, "How News Happens."

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Steven Waldman and the Working Group on Information Needs of Communities, *The Information Needs of Communities: The Changing Media Landscape in a Broadband Age*, 123, Federal Communications Commission, July 2011, <http://www.fcc.gov/info-needs-communities> (accessed September 3, 2012).

This is not to say that there are not some illuminating examples of stellar online news initiatives. *Pro Publica*, for example, has put together interactive databases allowing journalists and citizens to analyze Political Action Committee ("PAC") contributions and recipients of federal financial bailout funds.¹¹ Further, Factcheck.org and its cousin, the audiovisual Flackcheck.org, analyze factual claims made by political candidates and provide information correcting the record when the claims are unsubstantiated.¹² These sorts of efforts demonstrate the potential of the Internet as a news source.

B. Audience

Although there are questions about the quality and "newness" of online news content, that plentiful news is available online seems clear. Given the opportunity to obtain news online, how do Internet users respond? Further, how does changing technology affect the nature of the audience's encounters with news content?

When more choices are available to audiences, they are better able to match their interests to their news exposure. This is consequential in terms of (a) whether audiences seek news at all and, if they do, (b) which issues draw audience attention.

Just because news is available does not mean that people will seek the news. Before the emergence of the Internet, the expansion of cable television offered an early look at how audiences respond to increasing options. Political scientists Matthew Baum and Samuel Kernell found that audiences for presidential primetime appearances declined over time.¹³ The pattern was attributed in part to the emergence of cable television, which allowed uninterested viewers to avoid these addresses.¹⁴ The Internet, offering many more options, also facilitates the avoidance of news if audiences so choose. Markus Prior's research provides strong evidence that a media environment characterized by many entertainment options allows those preferring

¹¹ "Tools & Data," *Pro Publica*, accessed March 18, 2013. <http://www.propublica.org/tools>.

¹² See *Factcheck*, <http://www.factcheck.org> (accessed March 18, 2013); *Flackcheck*, <http://www.flackcheck.org> (accessed March 18, 2013).

¹³ Matthew A. Baum and Samuel Kernell, "Has Cable Ended the Golden Age of Presidential Television?," *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 1 (March 1999): 99.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

entertainment to avoid the news easily.¹⁵ The emergence of the Internet may further reduce news audiences because it provides alternative content that some find more interesting than public affairs.

Even when people choose to use online news sources, there are important differences in how the Internet guides news selection relative to other media. Newspapers and television news provide contextual cues about which topics are important—graphic indicators and story placement both convey this information. Further, one typically glances at the front page of a hard copy newspaper, even if a favored section is buried more deeply in the paper. For television news, one usually sits through stories ordered in such a way to convey importance. Internet news sites do convey some of these same types of contextual cues about story importance, such as listing a breaking story toward the top of a webpage, including a picture, or making the headline larger than the headlines of other news stories. Yet online, it is easier for readers to completely bypass these indicators and instead attend to pages that contain content more tailored to their particular interests.¹⁶

The ability to focus on issues of interest and to miss other topics is illustrated in social science research. David Tewksbury and Scott Althaus experimentally compared students' use of a hard copy newspaper to an online version of the same newspaper.¹⁷ They discovered that students using the online version were less likely to look at public affairs news in comparison to those reading a hard copy newspaper.¹⁸ Tewksbury and Althaus explained the result by noting that people are better able to narrowly pursue their own interests online.¹⁹ This is in contrast to hard copy newspapers, where contextual cues may lead readers to encounter issues about which they initially have little interest.²⁰ Other studies confirm that the Internet allows for

¹⁵ Markus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 151.

¹⁶ David Tewksbury and Scott L. Althaus, "Differences in Knowledge Acquisition among Readers of the Paper and Online Versions of a National Newspaper," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (Autumn 2000): 462.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 460–62.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 472.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 472.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 458.

the selection of news about specific issues of interest.²¹ Indeed, those with specialized interests may gravitate toward the Internet as a news source. Norman Nie and his colleagues found that when people are asked about the most important issues facing the United States, those more frequently using the Internet for news name less common issues, such as education and taxes, in comparison to those infrequently using the Internet for news, who name more popular issues such as the economy and the "War on Terror."²² Those with more specialized interests may turn to the Internet for more in-depth information on those topics.

Thus far, we have been discussing purposeful exposure—some people purposefully avoid news and some purposefully look for specific issues. Yet one can encounter news without intending to do so. When a music radio station includes a news break, for example, this could be seen as a type of unintentional news exposure. Similarly, people could run across news online without seeking it out. When logging on to a Yahoo! e-mail account, for instance, one could run across news content on the site. If news were strategically placed online to encourage unintentional news exposure, the Internet could increase news exposure.

But to what extent does incidental exposure to news occur? In the broadcast era, incidental exposure to the news may have occurred because, at certain times of day, audiences had few choices if they wanted to watch television.²³ Before cable, some likely watched the news not because they were interested, but because it was their only televised option. They could either watch the news or turn off the television. Tellingly, broadcast news audiences declined as cable television diffused and gave people more shows to watch other than news programming.²⁴ The Internet arguably has a similar effect, where citizens can browse websites tailored to their individual interests, thus avoiding the news if their preferences lie elsewhere.

²¹ See Shanto Iyengar et al., "Selective Exposure to Campaign Communication: The Role of Anticipated Agreement and Issue Public Membership," *Journal of Politics* 70, no. 1 (January 2008): 197–98; Young Mie Kim, "Issue Publics in the New Information Environment: Selectivity, Domain Specificity, and Extremity," *Communication Research*, 36, no. 2 (April 2009): 259.

²² Norman H. Nie et al., "The World Wide Web and the U.S. Political News Market," *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 2 (April 2010): 435.

²³ Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, 68–72.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

Yet accidental encounters with the news are possible online. According to a 2010 Pew Research Center survey, sixty-two percent of respondents reported having encountered news even when they were “online for purposes other than getting news.”²⁵ Social media sites also may provide Internet users with additional opportunities to encounter news if people push news to their connections. Notably, forty percent of American adults occasionally encounter political content from their friends via social networking sites, suggesting the potential for incidental exposure to news on sites like Facebook.²⁶ Although this number is impressive, current evidence suggests that these sites are not yet a main news source for many Americans.²⁷

Another important feature of the Internet also must be taken into account: the most frequently accessed news sources. Mainstream news outlets have large audiences online as well as offline. Matthew Hindman, in his extensive study of web traffic and politics, found that thirty times more people visit mainstream news websites, such as CNN, MSNBC, and the *New York Times*, than visit political websites, such as the *Huffington Post* and the *Free Republic*.²⁸ In addition to accessing these sites directly, online users also are directed to them. Search engines are one popular tool used to navigate the Internet, with 91 percent of adult Internet users reporting that they utilize search engines.²⁹ Their choice to use a search engine may influence the political information to which they have access. Search engine

²⁵ The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *Ideological News Sources: Who Watches and Why*, September 12, 2010, <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/652.pdf> (accessed September 3, 2012).

²⁶ Lee Rainie and Aaron Smith, *Social Networking Sites and Politics*, Pew Internet and American Life Project, March 12, 2012, <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Social-networking-and-politics/Main-findings/Social%20-networking-sites-and-politics.aspx> (accessed September 3, 2012).

²⁷ Amy Mitchell, Tom Rosenstiel, and Lean Christian, *The State of the News Media 2012: An Annual Report on American Journalism*, The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, <http://stateofthemediamedia.org/2012/mobile-devices-and-news-consumption-some-good-signs-for-journalism/what%20-facebook-and-twitter-mean-for-news/?src=prc-section> (accessed September 3, 2012).

²⁸ Matthew Hindman, *Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 66.

²⁹ Kristen Purcell, Joanna Brenner, and Lee Rainie, *Search Engine Use 2012*, Pew Internet and American Life Project, March 9, 2012, <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Search-Engine-Use-2012/Main-findings/Search-engine-use-over-time.aspx> (accessed September 3, 2012).

algorithms favor large, well-known websites at the expense of smaller ones, limiting the range of sources from which citizens can choose to read about public affairs.³⁰ During the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, for instance, traditional campaign sources, including mainstream news and official candidate websites, made up more than sixty percent of the top search results for the presidential candidates on search tools like Yahoo! and Google.³¹

Though more research is necessary in each of these areas, it is clear that the Internet allows citizens to choose whether to find political news online and may provide some opportunity for incidental news exposure. Online search technologies and the popularity of large sites, however, may influence the types of political information citizens find.

C. Effects

One reason for promoting media coverage of important issues is to inform the public. In the 1949 report from the FCC containing the Fairness Doctrine, precisely this rationale was offered: "*one of the most vital questions of mass communication in a democracy is the development of an informed public opinion through the public dissemination of news and ideas concerning the vital public issues of the day.*"³² Does the Internet contribute to the development of an informed public?

Social scientific research suggests that, for some, the Internet assists with information gain. Numerous studies document that consuming news media, in general, contributes to learning about important public issues.³³ Studies focusing specifically on the Internet

³⁰ Hindman, *Digital Democracy*, 56–57.

³¹ Ashley Muddiman, "Searching for the Next U.S. President: Differences in Search Engine Results for the 2008 U.S. Presidential Candidates," *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* (forthcoming).

³² Federal Communications Commission, "Editorializing by Broadcast Licensees," (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1949) 1249 (emphasis added).

³³ See William P. Eveland Jr. and Dietram A. Scheufele, "Connecting News Media Use with Gaps in Knowledge and Participation," *Political Communication* 17, no. 3 (July–September 2000): 228; Glenn J. Hansen and William L. Benoit, "Communication Forms as Predictors of Issue Knowledge in Presidential Campaigns: A Meta-Analytic Assessment," *Mass Communication and Society* 10, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 190; Jennifer Jerit, Jason Barabas, and Toby Bolsen, "Citizens, Knowledge, and the Information Environment," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 2 (April 2006): 267; Young Mie Kim and John Vishak,

also demonstrate that online news use is related to political knowledge.³⁴

Yet the Internet may affect knowledge gain in different ways than other media. First, the Internet may lead people to learn about different issues depending on their interests. In one experiment, those using a newspaper's website for news learned about different issues than those using a hard copy of the same newspaper, despite considerable overlaps in the content.³⁵ The authors proposed that online newspaper users were more effective at honing in on issues of interest and avoiding other content. Additional research supports the idea that the Internet allows those with specialized interests to obtain domain-specific knowledge.³⁶

Those without a substantive interest in the news may use the Internet to *avoid* gaining information about the news and current events. Work by Dietram Scheufele and Matthew Nisbet showed that those using the Internet for entertainment purposes have *lower* levels of political knowledge.³⁷ Markus Prior's research demonstrated that those who are uninterested in the news have lower levels of political knowledge when they have more media choices compared to when they have fewer choices.³⁸ Having access to both the Internet and cable television, Prior reasons, allows those preferring entertainment to screen out news and focus on entertainment.³⁹ Those *without* cable and the Internet may suffer through the news from time to time, thus gaining higher levels of political knowledge than those with more media choice.

"Just Laugh! You Don't Need to Remember: The Effects of Entertainment Media on Political Information Acquisition and Information Processing in Political Judgment," *Journal of Communication* 58, no. 2 (June 2008): 338–41; W. Russell Neuman, Marion R. Just, and Ann N. Crigler, *Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 96–109.

³⁴ See Kate Kenski and Natalie Jomini Stroud, "Connections between Internet Use and Political Efficacy, Knowledge, and Participation," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 50, no. 2 (June 2006): 175; Tewksbury and Althaus, "Knowledge Acquisition," 469.

³⁵ Tewksbury and Althaus, "Knowledge Acquisition," 472.

³⁶ Kim, "Issue Publics," 259.

³⁷ Dietram A. Scheufele and Matthew C. Nisbet, "Being a Citizen Online: New Opportunities and Dead Ends," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 7, no.3 (Summer 2002): 66.

³⁸ Prior, *Post Broadcast Democracy*, 137.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

Second, various online features can influence *how* citizens learn from the news. An experiment comparing those using a hyperlinked website to those using a website not including hyperlinks demonstrated that hyperlinks affect knowledge.⁴⁰ In particular, hyperlinks result in lower factual knowledge gain.⁴¹ Yet for experienced Internet news users, hyperlinks can generate greater knowledge density whereby users see more connections between various concepts. In other words, these linking tools help experienced users to develop more complex understandings of how political issues relate to one another.⁴²

Whether accidental exposure to news content online could increase public knowledge is unclear. Several studies suggest that people may learn from unintended news exposure.⁴³ David Tewksbury, Andrew Weaver, and Brett Maddex, for example, found correlations between political knowledge and encountering news online when not purposefully seeking it out.⁴⁴ Yet citizens do not have to pay attention to news they encounter unintentionally; they can simply switch to another website or ignore the information. If people are unmotivated to learn about the news, they may simply switch their exposure pattern when encountering news to something that better matches their preferences.

D. Summary

With respect to providing public affairs information and creating an informed public, the Internet has a mixed record. Although there are ways to refine the information that is available online, it is without question that news and public affairs content are widely accessible. Availability does not mean use, however. Contemporary social science

⁴⁰ William P. Eveland, Jr., Krisztina Marton, and Mihye Seo, "Moving Beyond 'Just the Facts': The Influence of Online News on the Content and Structure of Public Affairs Knowledge," *Communication Research* 31, no.1 (February 2004): 82.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴³ See David Tewksbury, Andrew J. Weaver, and Brett D. Maddex, "Accidentally Informed: Incidental News Exposure on the World Wide Web," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (October 2001): 533; Cliff Zukin and Robin Snyder, "Passive Learning: When the Media Environment is the Message," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (Autumn 1984): 638.

⁴⁴ Tewksbury, Weaver, and Maddex, "Accidentally Informed," 545.

and the realities of the modern media environment suggest that the online news environment is far more complicated—audiences need the motivation to turn to the information and an understanding of how search technologies filter online information. The success of many news websites demonstrates that there is some appetite for news content; however, the appeal is not universal. Online news may come close to meeting the goal of providing information about public issues, but it also may make it easier for uninterested segments of the population to filter out the news. If the objective is to have an informed public, gaps in news interest and knowledge may be read as disconcerting.

III. ONLINE NEWS AND DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

The normative underpinnings of the Fairness Doctrine extended beyond the provision that public affairs information should be provided to the public. A second contention of the doctrine was that citizens should have access to diverse perspectives: *“the public interest is best served in a democracy through the ability of the people to hear expositions of the various positions taken by responsible groups and individuals on particular topics and to choose between them.”*⁴⁵

The “ability of people to hear expositions of various positions” requires elaboration. The FCC meant that citizens should have access to different perspectives. Today, people arguably do have this access—and to a much greater extent than in times past. Thanks at least in part to the Internet, people can easily encounter a variety of perspectives on important issues. Yet whether people actually *hear* opposing views objectively is another matter entirely. We examine access to diverse views and the motivation to think about different perspectives in the sections below.

A. Content

Without question, diverse perspectives exist online. An online search of virtually any public issue will turn up a variety of views. Although many opinions are accessible online, the way in which they are structured differs in a subtle, but important, way from the regulations imposed by the Fairness Doctrine. To promote encounters

⁴⁵ Federal Communications Commission, “Editorializing by Broadcast Licensees,” Washington, DC: GPO, 1949, 1251 (emphasis added).

with various views, the Fairness Doctrine required stations licensed by the FCC to provide time for reasonable, competing views on controversial public issues.⁴⁶ This mandated within-station balance. A form of within-station balance can be found online among those news sites striving for objectivity and practicing balanced reporting. Other sites, however, have partisan bents. Yet a user still can encounter many perspectives by accessing a diverse range of partisan sites. Thus, online users can achieve across-website balance.

A content analysis of Internet news sources helps to illustrate the structure of news online. Matthew Baum and Tim Groeling conducted an extensive analysis of news selections by five different online sources: AP, Reuters, *Daily Kos*, *Free Republic*, and *Fox News*.⁴⁷ They evaluated whether different perspectives were being conveyed online by analyzing the stories covered on each site.⁴⁸ The results documented partisan bents in story selection, particularly for *Daily Kos*, *Free Republic*, and *Fox News*.⁴⁹ In order to encounter the different available views that exist among these sites, users would need to access multiple sites.

These findings point to an important concern about Internet content, namely that it could lead to "echo-chambers" where people mainly hear views matching their own.⁵⁰ Available online content allows this to happen. Partisan bloggers, for example, often link to other likeminded blogs. Even when they do link to the other side, in many instances, the only reason is to make fun of the other view.⁵¹ This feature of online content may direct users to focus on likeminded information. Whether online audiences tend to look exclusively at likeminded information at the expense of competing views is the subject of the next section.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1259.

⁴⁷ Matthew A. Baum and Tim Groeling, "New Media and the Polarization of American Political Discourse," *Political Communication* 25, no. 4 (November 2008): 346.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 220; see also Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 190.

⁵¹ Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*, 148.

B. Audience

Although multiple perspectives are *available* online, this does not mean that audiences *encounter* them. With the availability of many sources advocating for different views, more onus now is placed on the media user. In a media environment that contains sites with many political bents, which sites do individuals choose? Do they seek out diverse views? To what extent does technology affect their choice?

Several observations are important. First, traditional news sites and news aggregators garner large audiences.⁵² To the extent that these sites present diverse perspectives, this could be seen as evidence that the Internet provides for exposure to diverse views.

Second, numerous research studies have found that people prefer information matching their political proclivities, a behavior known as selective exposure.⁵³ Several studies focusing on online behavior illustrate that the same phenomenon occurs online.⁵⁴ Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and Jingbo Meng, for example, tracked participant use of an online website with eight articles on four issues, with one pro and one con article on each issue.⁵⁵ They found that participants were more likely to select, and to spend time with, attitude-consistent articles.⁵⁶

Third, even though individuals display a preference for likeminded information, this does not mean that they have quarantined

⁵² Kenny Olmstead et al., *Digital: By the Numbers*, The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, <http://stateofthemedias.org/2012/digital-news-gains-audience-but-loses-more-ground-in-chase-for-revenue/digital-by-the-numbers> (accessed September 3, 2012); see also Hindman, *Digital Democracy*, 66.

⁵³ See Natalie Jomini Stroud, *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 59-60; Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and Jingbo Meng, "Looking the Other Way: Selective Exposure to Attitude-Consistent and Counterattitudinal Political Information," *Communication Research* 36, no. 3 (June 2009): 426; William Hart et al., "Feeling Validated Versus Being Correct: A Meta-Analysis of Selective Exposure to Information," *Psychological Bulletin* 135, no. 4 (July 2009): 579.

⁵⁴ See Bruce Bimber and Richard Davis, *Campaigning Online: The Internet in U.S. Elections* (New York: Oxford, 2003), 121; Thomas J. Johnson, Shannon L. Bichard, and Weiwu Zhang, "Communication Communities or 'CyberGhettos'? A Path Analysis Model Examining Factors that Explain Selective Exposure to Blogs," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 15 (October 2009): 60.

⁵⁵ Knobloch-Westerwick, "Looking the Other Way," 432.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 442.

themselves into impenetrable echo chambers.⁵⁷ Some purposefully go online to look for diverse views.⁵⁸ Research by R. Kelly Garrett demonstrates that although the Internet may facilitate seeking likeminded views, it is not clear that the tendency to avoid counter-attitudinal information is equally strong.⁵⁹ Even if users gravitate toward likeminded information, they may tolerate some discrepant views.

Further, just as people may encounter news accidentally online, they also may incidentally encounter perspectives with which they disagree online.⁶⁰ Magdalena Wojcieszak and Diana Mutz, for example, found that people encountered political news in chat rooms devoted to topics other than politics, such as trivia and hobby chat forums.⁶¹ In these spaces, people sometimes encountered political disagreement even though they did not seek out the disagreement actively.⁶² In perhaps the most relevant study, Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse Shapiro, analyzing Internet tracking data from the 112 most highly trafficked news and politics sites, document that although partisan websites predominately attract likeminded partisans, partisans tend to go to diverse outlets online.⁶³ Weighing the available evidence, it is clear that the Internet makes it easy for people to find multiple views. Although people seem to gravitate toward likeminded information, they still may encounter different views.

⁵⁷ See R. Kelly Garrett, "Echo Chambers Online? Politically Motivated Selective Exposure Among Internet Users," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14 (January 2009): 279; R. Kelly Garrett, "Politically Motivated Reinforcement Seeking: Reframing the Selective Exposure Debate," *Journal of Communication* 59 (June 2009): 676; Magdalena Wojcieszak and Diana C. Mutz, "Online Groups and Political Discourse: Do Online Discussion Spaces Facilitate Exposure to Political Disagreement?" *Journal of Communication* 59 (March 2009): 47; Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Ideological Segregation Online and Offline," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126 (November 2011): 1799.

⁵⁸ Jennifer Stromer-Galley, "Diversity of Political Conversation on the Internet: Users' Perspectives," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 8, no. 3 (April 2003).

⁵⁹ Garrett, "Echo Chambers Online?," 279.

⁶⁰ Jennifer Brundidge, "Encountering 'Difference' in the Contemporary Public Sphere: The Contribution of the Internet to the Heterogeneity of Political Discussion Networks," *Journal of Communication* 60 (December 2010): 696.

⁶¹ Wojcieszak and Mutz, "Online Discussion Spaces," 47.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Gentzkow, "Ideological Segregation," 1799.

Despite the ability to encounter diverse views online, more research needs to evaluate whether people *hear* these views. It is difficult for people to separate their personal beliefs from their evaluations of alternative views and news content. For example, scientific evidence that favors one's views is subject to less scrutiny in comparison to information that is opposed to one's perspective.⁶⁴ Research on the hostile media phenomenon has documented that, when faced with a putatively neutral article, partisans are more likely to see the article as biased *against* their political perspective instead of in *favor* of their views.⁶⁵ In other words, partisans on both sides detect a hostile bias in the media.⁶⁶ When a source *actually* is biased, those who agree with the source's political bent see the source as less biased compared to those who disagree with the source's political bent.⁶⁷

Fourth, and finally, advances in online technology may limit the diversity of views people see. In what Eli Pariser calls the "filter bubble," search engines, social media sites, and political campaigns are personalizing the information individuals receive based on their past online behaviors such that each person lives in his or her own online bubble of individualized information.⁶⁸ Personalization can help people to find news, products, and candidates aligning with their individual interests. The danger, however, is that personalization involves computer algorithms deciding what people want without alerting individuals that their past online behavior changes the information that they see.⁶⁹ This could mean that people who tend to

⁶⁴ Charles G. Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper, "Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 11 (1979): 2098.

⁶⁵ Robert P. Vallone, Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper, "The Hostile Media Phenomenon: Biased Perception and Perceptions of Media Bias in Coverage of the Beirut Massacre," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49, no. 3 (1985): 584.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ See Matthew A. Baum and Phil Gussin, "In the Eye of the Beholder: How Information Shortcuts Shape Individual Perceptions of Bias in the Media," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 3 (2008): 26; Lauren Feldman, "Partisan Differences in Opinionated News Perceptions: A Test of the Hostile Media Effect," *Political Behavior* 33 (2011): 407; Albert C. Gunther et al., "Congenial Public, Contrary Press, and Biased Estimates of the Climate of Opinion," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2001): 313.

⁶⁸ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), 9.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

read news articles from a liberal perspective will begin seeing more liberal-leaning articles on a news website without realizing that other views are being suppressed by personalization technology. Political and issue campaigns take advantage of personalization techniques as well.⁷⁰ By purchasing databases containing consumer and Internet use behavior, campaigns can reach out only to people who are politically active and who already support a specific cause.

In sum, even though diverse views exist online, there is no guarantee that (a) the public will process the information with equal charity toward all perspectives or (b) each person will have the same access to diverse information as the web becomes more personalized.

C. Effects

The normative impetus behind requiring the presentation of diverse perspectives is the idea that exposure to different views is beneficial for citizens. Recent communication research suggests that although there may be clear benefits to hearing alternative perspectives, not all consequences of exposure to oppositional views are in keeping with visions of an ideal democracy. Diana Mutz found that talking about politics with those holding different views can increase understandings of other perspectives and can improve political tolerance.⁷¹ Yet exposure to discrepant views also can increase political ambivalence, reduce political participation, and delay decisions for whom to vote.⁷² Although Mutz focused on interpersonal conversations, research suggests that exposure to counter-attitudinal media can have similar effects.⁷³ In particular, analysis by author Natalie Stroud shows that the use of counter-attitudinal media is related to lower levels of political participation and less polarized

⁷⁰ Philip N. Howard, *New Media Campaigns and the Managed Citizen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 170; see also D. Sunshine Hillygus and Todd G. Shields, *The Persuadable Voter: Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 155-156.

⁷¹ Diana C. Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 85.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷³ Stroud, *Niche News*, 123; Susanna Dilliplane, "All the News You Want to Hear: The Impact of Partisan News Exposure on Political Participation," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (June 2011): 304.

attitudes and that likeminded partisan media use predicts higher levels of participation and polarization.⁷⁴

This is not to say that exposure to counter-attitudinal information has uniform consequences. When forced to encounter counter-attitudinal information in a laboratory setting, the effects are complicated. In some instances, citizens respond based on their partisan inclinations. One study found that when political values—such as the belief that “our society would benefit greatly if people were more self-sufficient”—are attributed to specific political groups (e.g., “conservative Republicans believe that . . .”), people are more likely to respond on the basis of their political leanings compared to when the same political value is attributed to neutral others (e.g., “some people believe that . . .”).⁷⁵ This study demonstrates that those opposed to a message, such as Democrats hearing a message about Republican views, may react negatively to the message. Other studies confirm that exposure to counter-attitudinal information can lead people to rebel against the message by becoming even more committed to their original attitudes.⁷⁶ Yet citizens also can be persuaded by partisan information. Lauren Feldman’s experimental research demonstrates that exposure to partisan, opinionated news can have persuasive effects that occur independently of one’s partisan inclinations.⁷⁷ Future research aiming to understand this mixed pattern of results with respect to how citizens respond to counter-attitudinal information will help to clarify the desirability of exposure to diverse views.

Even less research has been done on the effects of personalization technologies. Most discussions of individualization have focused on its descriptive existence rather than on its effects. More research needs to be conducted to understand the effects of elements of the Internet that

⁷⁴ Stroud, *Niche News*, 136–37.

⁷⁵ Paul Goren, Christopher M. Federico, and Miki Caul Kittilson, “Source Cues, Partisan Identities, and Political Value Expression,” *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 4 (October 2009): 817–18.

⁷⁶ Michael F. Meffert et al., “The Effects of Negativity and Motivated Information Processing During a Political Campaign,” *Journal of Communication* 56 (March 2006): 45; Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, “Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (July 2006): 765.

⁷⁷ Lauren Feldman, “The Opinion Factor: The Effects of Opinionated News on Information Processing and Attitude Change,” *Political Communication* 28 (April 2011): 176.

make it more difficult for individuals to find information that differs from their personal perspective.

D. *Summary*

The Fairness Doctrine aimed to increase the availability of diverse views. By many counts, the Internet has done just this. Whether the audience encounters and appreciates diverse views, however, is another matter entirely. Although the evidence suggests that audiences encounter counter-attitudinal information, they also display a preference for likeminded information, do not always give contradictory information a fair hearing, and may increasingly encounter smaller amounts of diverse information as the Internet becomes more personalized. In this sense, the public, rather than the Internet, may fail to live up to one of the normative propositions underlying the doctrine.

IV. CONCLUSION

Normative provisions contained within the now-defunct Fairness Doctrine served as a way to organize research on how the Internet affects news coverage, the development of an informed public, and encounters with diverse perspectives. Little precedent is found here that the Internet fails to live up to the doctrine's content requirements. News is available online. Diverse views *can be* found online. Instead, the image that emerges from the reviewed research is that public perceptions and motivations play an important role in the *reception* of news and diverse views. Some are uninterested in news and others seek it out. Some want to retrieve different opinions and others to confirm their existing views. The Internet facilitates all of these desires because it provides users with so many choices. At the same time, algorithms for displaying information online may be constraining choice. Future attention should be paid to the development of online personalization technologies to determine whether individuals are placed increasingly into individualized online spaces without their active consent.

Although this essay has proceeded without questioning the normative proposals undergirding the Fairness Doctrine, they should be critically examined. Is an informed public equipped with insight into diverse views desirable? Although we personally tend to agree, the research reviewed here urges caution. People should have choice when it comes to their media diet. And exposure to diverse views comes with costs—lower levels of participation, for example. The

challenge is to figure out how to close any potential gaps between normative and descriptive accounts about exposure to news and diverse views.

